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# DECORATION & FURNITURE

## TALKS WITH DECORATORS.

### IV.—JOHN LA FARGE ON THE RE-DECORATION OF THE AMERICAN "MEETING-HOUSE."



HE real difficulty in the decoration of a modern church lies in its lack of proportion," said Mr. John La Farge, pausing from his large mural painting for The Church of the Ascension.

"The absence of proportion in the building of our period is, in fact, so common, that in certain houses where there happens to be a well-proportioned room you are struck by it, and are apt to exclaim, 'What fine proportion!'"

"For this is not the city lot partially responsible?"

"Yes; its definite limits are in great measure the cause, and the same difficulty controls, in like manner, the city church. There is another reason. The length and breadth may be fairly given; but these represent a certain amount of money. There arises a necessity for economy. To meet this something must be lopped off here, something else there, and the advantages of proportion gained are in this way easily lost.

"The earlier classic buildings of this country are by far the best in this respect. The thickness and height of the columns, the distances between the columns, their relation to the building, accustom the mind to think of proportions. In the old Greek and Roman churches and in the Japanese temples we find that proportion is the main thing. But in branching out into new styles, of which we have not the secret, as we have done in the last forty years, we have lost proportion."

"Which was the easier to decorate, the Brick Church, on Fifth Avenue, or the Church of the Incarnation, in which you had some share?"

"The Brick Church, for this same reason. The one in its lines may be referred to classic styles. The other is pseudo-Gothic."

"The meeting-house form is that of a large proportion of the earlier churches in this country. They all want to furbish up. Can't you advise them?"

"This is exactly what I would say: 'The first business is to remedy the defects of your architects. Give me the key of your church, and put your money in the bank. Get together at least enough to cover your walls with paint. The rest is not a question of money.'

"But let me give a case. There was the Congregational Church of Newport. The contract reads: 'I,

John La Farge, agree to paint and glaze the Congregational Church of Newport, R. I., for the sum of \$3500, etc.' The centre of the church rises higher than the sides, to an unbroken, flat ceiling. At the end of the church is a flat wall, with a slight sunken space arched at the top, back of the preacher. This gives an advantage at once in a reality of modelling, which, in a meagre way, is the recall of an apse.

"In front stands the reading-desk, ugly in detail and color, but the general outline of which is not bad, and suggests the ambo of Byzantine art.

"Now, on these two forms—the ambo and the arched recess behind—I base my decoration. As the church has pillars, with arches resting on them, behind which are the side galleries, there is sufficient recall of all early round arch buildings to make me lean to some Roman-

remember that its decoration is very rich, and that I have very little money to work with. I must, then, take advantage of the way in which this style favors very large plain spaces as connected with very rich ones. I should have said before that it was determined to retain the wood-work—pews and that sort of thing—and that it was very ugly and poorly colored. Therefore, my decoration must be such that it will not call attention to this ugliness. Consequently, my large, plain spaces are placed near the wood, and my fine ornament goes higher up.

"Then let us begin at the top. Here I am free. The ceiling is the baldest part of the whole building. It is simply flat, white plaster, without a cornice, a blank canvas, as it were, where I can make it rich and handsome without coming in contact with any ugly necessity.

Large, circular ventilators are in the side-walls, above the arches and pillars, making what might be called a clerestory where are the galleries. These openings suggest panelling, which, if I were building, would be filled with marbles and costly stones. Now, for these marbles I substitute paint, and my painting, if it is successful in color, will always recall the idea of marble, with the memory of which we start."

"You don't mean imitation of marbles?"

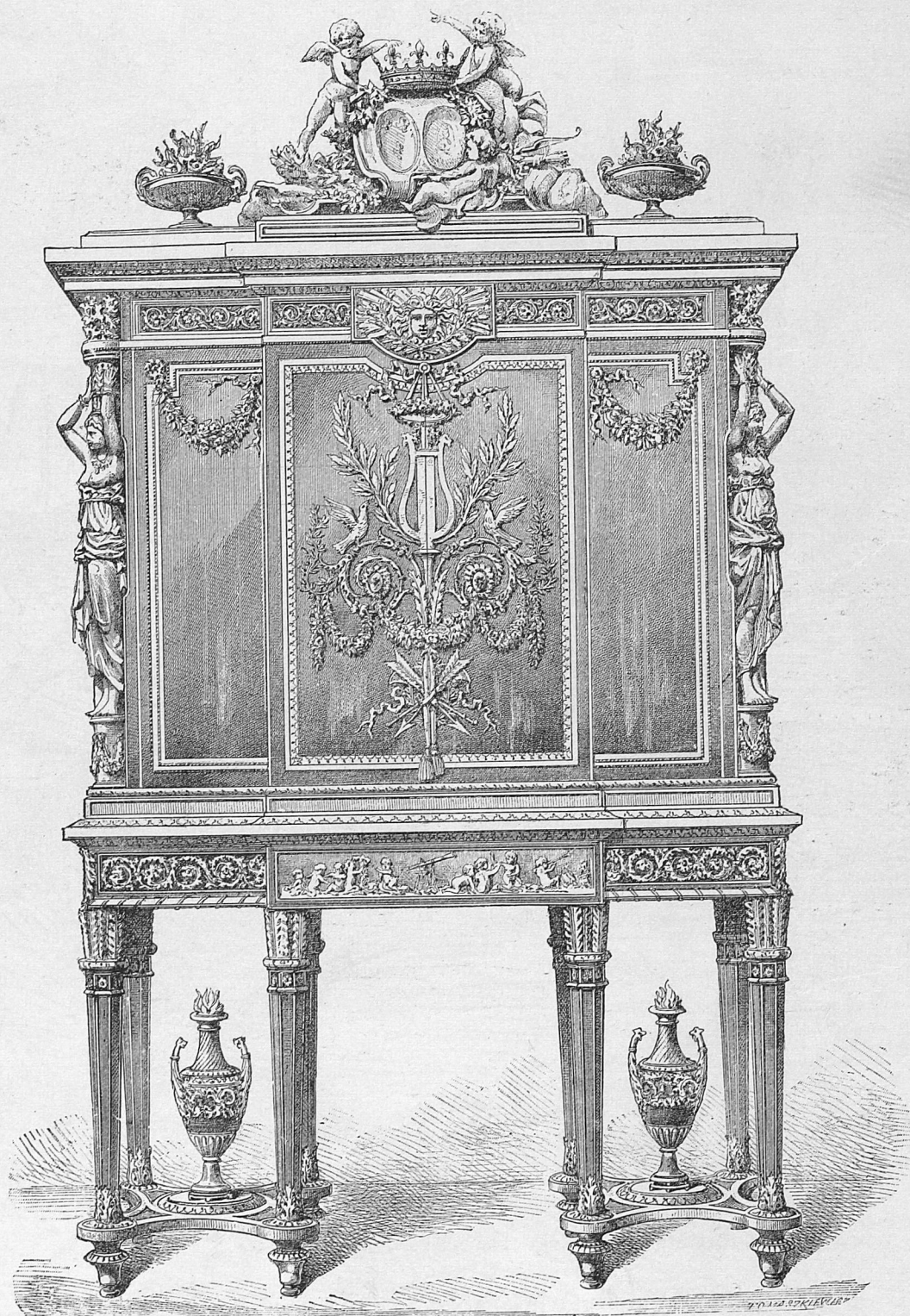
"I don't copy marbles, because I would never get any real richness in that way. The texture would always be poor and ridiculous. Anybody can laugh at that childishness, but nobody can laugh at a rich combination of colored masses of paint, which would have much the same richness that an Eastern carpet has.

"As I can have no mystery in my flat ceiling I may improve and make it look handsomer by continuing on it the panelling of the side-walls. But, in that case, the very firmness of outline which helps to emphasize the solidity of the side-walls will, as it were, draw down the ceiling. I shall therefore change both the color and ornamentation of the ceiling. As there is an indication of beam, I connect the beams with the wall and keep them firm. The large spaces between I paint in the deepest colors I can reach, and break the surface with small ornament."

"Byzantine?"

"Yes, and of the highest kind I can get. But as I have no examples of color so applied, I follow the arrangements of color in an Oriental carpet, which comes from the same stock as Byzantine ornament. This gives me another advantage. All my men are new, ordinary country

workmen. One I find has a good eye for color, while my foreman has no idea of color at all. By taking actually a carpet, the arrangement of which seems to suit the case, I, teaching my man to mix the colors after my

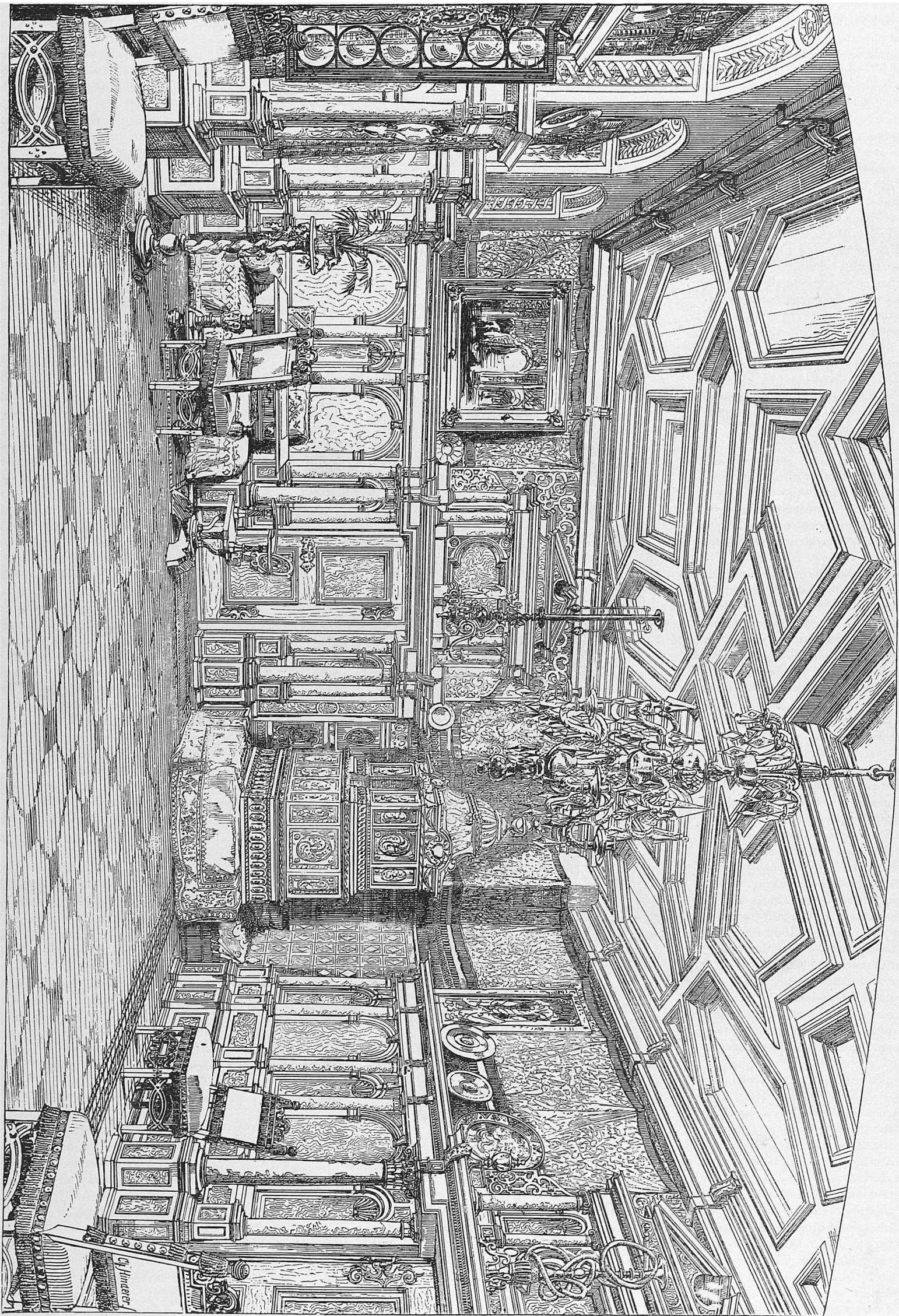


LOUIS SEIZE CABINET, FOR JEWELS, WITH COPPER GILT MOUNTINGS.

esque or Byzantine style. Of course, I can't strictly follow one style, as the divisions of the church are not logical to either.

"Very well, I select that period. But I must always





SITTING-ROOM WITH PANELLLED CEILING IN A HOUSE IN NUREMBERG.



methods, get him to judge of the success of different tones by their resemblance to the copy."

"You take a certain pride in thus being able to use your men?"

"Certainly. It has helped me in my scheme of economy. You remember we have but little money."

"As the end of the church is, in the ecclesiastical idea, its most important part, here I place my most important decoration. Now I bring in my draughtsmen. I am forbidden by my agreement with the church, and, if I were not, I would so abstain, from using any decoration not becoming a Congregational church. I cannot, then, refer to ecclesiastical tradition for what I shall do at what would be the apse or chancel."

"What would that suggest?"

"All chancel or apse decoration is based on something standing up—something perpendicular—a high altar, for example. Here I study the French Romanesque, where you find the old Greek influence that never died out from the south of France. I decide on a portico arrangement, the straight triangular lines of whose pediment by contradiction emphasizes the arch."

"Will it not seem like a passage-way?"

"No, the round arch outside of it prevents its resembling an opening, which it should not appear to be. All this detail I have drawn full-size as carefully as if it were for the home of a millionaire, and this is the most expensive part of the work."

"Can I see the drawings?"

"No, because they were stolen, as were many others, to set another man up in business. I only wish I might show them to you. This, the portico construction, is, as it were, connected as nearly as possible with the real shadow of the arch, and with a slight amount of modelling."

"The remainder of the surface, which is about nine tenths of that inclosed within the arch, is covered with ornamentation, gilded and painted with careful attention to advancing and receding colors, so that a suggestion of modelling is carried all the way through."

"That seems abstruse?"

"It is the difficult part of it all, for it implies a knowledge of painting, and lies at the basis of all color decoration."

"You find workmen to understand it?"

"An executant will always discount your work. Give him a hundred, he may return ninety-five per cent., if he does it as well as yourself. Sometimes you will find such an one, and he will discount what to his eye seems allowable."

"But in this space a text is to be introduced. It is selected by the minister, and embodies the spirit of his teaching. That, then, is the important thing. I make a break in the panel and treat it differently from anything else in the building. Here I recall in very light tones the color of the ceiling. Against that the text alone stands relieved."

"Conceive below this, then, the lines of the ambo—the reading-desk—and you will understand how it unites with the lines of the portico and surrounding arch in a consistent, harmonious, and decorative arrangement of lines."

"How do you treat the space surrounding the arch?"

"There I continue the idea of panelling which decorates the clerestory, and thus connect it with the side-walls."

"And the ceiling of the galleries, as it were, of the clerestory?"

"Here I have no interest in lifting the ceiling; on the contrary, were I to do so I would emphasize the villainies in the construction of the arch. The soffit is as thin as paper. But if I take the soffit, and color it to melt into the gallery ceiling, I get the appearance of thickness. So I gild both and ornament with a simple pattern in color."

"Do you decorate in any way the side-walls below?"

"No," said Mr. La Farge, looking at his watch, "but we will leave that matter, if you please, for consideration in another talk."

M. G. H.

The Japanese koro, or incense-burner (five feet, nine inches high) illustrated herewith by the courtesy of the owners, Messrs. Gribble & Nash, is a fine example of modern Japanese bronze work. It was cast and finished by Masayoshi, of Tokio. The figure at the top is that of the goddess Benten Sama—the Chinese Venus, who is often represented on a dragon; the figures below, among the vine-wreathed bamboo supports, are the seven Chinese sages. A certain sage who spent his time in fishing, until the emperor made him prime-minister, is



JAPANESE KORO, OR INCENSE-BURNER. DRAWN BY E. J. MEEKER.

represented on the face of the koro. In use the incense is placed in the koro, through an opening in the back.

#### OLD WALL-PAPERS.

NOWADAYS, when people delight to furbish up and bring again into use everything of a decorative sort that has descended to us from the past, it is rather strange that old-time wall-papers should be forgotten. Every-

body remembers having seen, in old houses, panelled papers, with hunting scenes, landscapes, Venetian palaces, or pastoral subjects, repeated over and over. It is true that most of these have very little artistic merit, but they are quaint and old, and as good as many other old things, which are admired chiefly because of their age and consequent rarity. And these old papers are not all to be despised, looked at from the point of art. The first attempts to introduce printed paper hangings of a high grade were made by artists of considerable talent. In

France, especially, such well-known designers as Jean-Baptiste Fay and J. Lafitte did not disdain to make drawings for the manufacturers of their day any more than William Morris or Walter Crane do to-day.

One occasionally finds in the lining-paper of old books specimens of printed wall-paper of an earlier period, that of the latter end of the Renaissance. In these the design is usually of flowers or insects, and while, in general, recalling the characteristic stamped leather hangings of the time in handling and treatment, they are evidently free imitations of the Chinese and Japanese painted or printed papers imported by the Hollanders.

Up to 1688 the stencil was the means most used in Europe, as in the East, for the production of ornamental wall-papers. About that time Jean Papillon, and, after him, Jacques Chauveau, brought to a relative degree of perfection the method of printing from rough woodcuts still in use. In 1785 we find Huet, Fay and the younger Fragonard producing designs for Réveillon and other manufacturers. The great factory at Mulhouse was founded in 1790, and received some of the artists of the Gobelins factory, who had to fly from France because they were suspected of being royalists.

A collection of examples of old papers might, then, include works of well-known artists, of very different styles, and of some of the most interesting periods of European art manufacture. It could be turned to use just as scraps of old, stamped leather, of tapestry or damask are, for linings of cupboards, for backgrounds to recesses and shelves, for screens, and several other purposes. It would be found comparatively an inexpensive hobby, and there would, doubtless, be no difficulty in inducing dealers, who make yearly trips across the Atlantic, to take the little trouble that would be required to hunt out the most interesting examples. R. R.

#### PROGRESS IN GALVANO-PLASTIC WORK.

At a conference recently held at the Union Centrale des Arts Decoratifs, in Paris, M. Henri Bouilhet made some suggestive remarks on galvano-plastic reproductions of works of art, which, as such reproductions are much used in the ornamentation of our apartments, are in place here. It is plain, to begin with, that while casts in plaster may give fair ideas of originals in marble or other stone, they cannot give a notion of what works in metal look like, the effect of these latter depending greatly on the color of the surface, its polish, and the finish of the details, particularities which cannot be reproduced except in a similar metal. In the galvanic battery any metal may be used, either to form a solid piece or to make a coating on a shell more or less thick of another metal, and the original, from which the cast is taken can be copied so minutely, that, except by

an expert, it can hardly be distinguished from the reproduction. The difficulties encountered until recently were mainly in the production of alloys and in the imitation of the flow of the metal in castings. Many electrotypers, even in this country, are now prepared to obtain in the battery any required alloy to cast, that is not only in pure copper, gold or silver, but in brass, bronze and other compound metals of any required density, color, and fineness of grain. It is even possible to reproduce the finest Japanese work in differ-